



Troublemaker

By Collab

Larry Butz doesn't want to be a troublemaker. He can't *help* it.

Is it his fault if he gets excited about knowing the answer for once? Who cares if he got too excited to raise his hand, isn't the most important part that he's right? And it isn't like he's *trying* to be disruptive when he bounces his leg during tests, it just helps him think. If the floor shakes when he does it, maybe they should make better floors.

He tries to make friends, but nobody's that impressed with how much he knows about Signal Samurai or how to draw dogs. He's pretty sure he heard once that if you get a girlfriend, it means she likes to spend time with you, so he asks out whichever girl in his class will listen, and wonders why they break up with him a week later. He talks to them! He spends time with them! He gets gifts for them! Why don't they like him?

The boys don't like him much, either. They think it's funny when he gets stuck on the monkey bars after climbing on top of them, or gets water all over himself from blowing soap bubbles in the bathroom, but not in a nice way.

He's a chatterbox. A space cadet. A troublemaker.

He gets in trouble for the littlest things, like stepping out of line to

look at a cool bug he saw, or drumming on his desk while the teacher is talking, or playing with a ball a little too enthusiastically during recess and getting it stuck in a tree.

It gets bad enough that he starts getting blamed for things going wrong that aren't even his fault, because he's the screw-up, so it *has* to be him, right? When a bee gets into the classroom, it must be because Larry opened a window, despite the fact he never even went anywhere near them. When one of the old library books falls apart in his classmate's hands, well, Larry checked it out last, so he must have done something to it, even though he didn't even actually read it - he'd been too busy with other things. When the fire alarm goes off without a fire happening, even after the principal admits it was some kind of accident with the wiring, everyone in his class thinks Larry had something to do with it.

He used to think his last name was pretty funny. But now, he's not very fond of it at all, because everyone uses it to blame him. *If something smells, it's usually the Butz.*

It's not *fair* that he gets scolded so often. He doesn't mean to get into trouble, it just *happens*! He can be good, he knows it!

So when an envelope with thirty-eight dollars *exactly* appears on the playground one morning, he puts it away and swears he'll tell the teacher as soon as class starts. He doesn't *mean* to forget about it, but when he tries to raise his hand, she ignores him and starts on the lesson, and he knows he'll be in trouble if he doesn't pay attention. He's trying to be *extra good* today, so that's what he's going to do.

He pays so much attention that he forgets about the envelope.

It's a *gym day*, and those are the best days because it means he gets

to run around for a whole *hour* without anyone being mad at him, as long as he isn't too loud and doesn't climb up on the bleachers again. There's one kid staying behind in the classroom because he broke his arm last week or something, but Larry doesn't pay it much mind.

But then it's time to go to lunch, and everyone's shouting because one of Larry's classmates is missing his lunch money. Thirty-eight dollars *exactly*.

Larry, quite suddenly, remembers the envelope.

But he doesn't want to get in *trouble*.

Maybe he can find a way to slip it into the kid's backpack later and pretend it was there all along? Or maybe he can pretend to find it out in the hall? There has to be a way out of this, right?

But now someone's pointing at the kid who stayed behind because he broke his arm, and now *everyone* is pointing, and Larry is very very glad that they're not pointing at *him*, because that looks like it *sucks*. Better him than Larry, right? It's a nice change of pace for someone else to be the troublemaker for once.

But it doesn't feel fair. This isn't the other kid's fault, either. It isn't his fault the money got lost, and it definitely isn't his fault that Larry smells. But Larry thinks that he can take one for the team, right? Once this all blows over, he can find a way to return the money without anyone knowing, and then maybe the kid won't be blamed anymore.

He knows that's not how it's going to work. He knows the kid is gonna be hated just like him, and the only way to stop it is to take the fall again. And he's gotten in trouble one too many times to risk that.

But then there's hands slamming on a desk, the way Larry likes to slam them before he's told to knock it off. There's a raised, ringing voice, the way Larry likes to shout when he hopes no one is listening.

The kid whose money got stolen isn't going to stand for this blatant miscarriage of justice... whatever the heck that means. He demands proof that the kid being blamed stole the money.

Hey... yeah! Yeah, that's right, they don't have any proof! They don't have anything on the kid! Why should he get in trouble when there's no proof he did anything?! That's not fair at all!

With righteous anger, and no small amount of shame, Larry pipes up too. He knows for a fact this isn't this kid's fault. There's no way he'll admit he's the one that found the money, but this guy doesn't deserve to be blamed for something he didn't do.

The kid seems so shiny-eyed and thankful when everyone backs off, thanks to Larry and that other kid. He won't stop thanking the two. It makes Larry feel a little funny, to have someone that likes him so much. And a little guilty, because this whole mess kinda was his fault this time.

But he doesn't want to confess to that, because Phoenix Wright and Miles Edgeworth want to be friends with him. He's never *had* friends before. He can't screw this up.

Maybe if he makes sure they like him, they won't be mad if he tells them what happened. He'll just hold on to the money until he knows for *absolutely, positively sure* that he's a good friend to them. He can't screw this up. He won't screw this up.

So, for fifteen years, he keeps that old envelope and his old promise

safe. An old keychain is tucked away inside it, alongside thirty-eight dollars *exactly*, waiting for the moment where Larry feels like it'll still mean something after he gives the money back.

Waiting for the moment where he's sure he's not a troublemaker anymore.





Support Player

By PirateJenna

Mashed potatoes and ice cream were a weird combination. Not one that Larry was necessarily opposed to, but weird all the same.

As he leaned forward to grab his drink off the floor, Larry glanced at Nick's bowl. Still mostly full. On any other night, Larry would have been thrilled that his suggestion to use less dishes by putting the mashed potatoes and ice cream in at the same time had been accepted. But the lack of argument or even jokes about how gross it was was kinda concerning.

A glance at Nick's face didn't help much either, though that wasn't a great gauge right now, what with the stitches and gauze. Not to mention the painkillers that Larry'd had to force Nick to take when he arrived.

Tears started to slide down Nick's face.

Quick check on the TV. Yeah, this was definitely not a sad part.

"Hey, Nick—"

"What's wrong with me?"

Larry froze. If he'd been able to, he would have shut off the TV, but he felt trapped, staring at Nick's face as tears poured down it, dancing

in and out of the shades cast by the screen.

When Nick didn't continue, Larry tried to say something, but only managed a gasped, "huh?"

"Ever'body leaves me. Miles left. M' parents left. Now Dollie," his voiced cracked on her name, and Larry felt a spike of anger at that. Nobody got to hurt his friends like that, and if she wasn't sitting in jail right now... well, he'd... have some things to say to her! "m I gonna be alone forever?"

It was that comment, the anger he still felt, plus the slurring of Nick's words that said this was probably the medicine talking (cause there was no way Nick would say those things. Think them, sure. But he didn't like to admit stuff like that to people) that finally knocked Larry's mouth loose.

"Hey, I'm still here!" He grinned and nudged Nick's shoulder to look at him.

It took every ounce of his strength to hold that smile when Nick turned to him with the saddest, hollowest expression and said "for now."

"Nick!"

Tears burst down Larry's face as he reached forward to pull his friend, his best friend, into a hug. "I promise I'm not going anywhere, and nothing will change that! You won't get rid of me even if you want to!"



Larry had to ring the doorbell five times before Nick opened up. The

second the door opened he shoved his foot in, catching the door as Nick tried to close it again. He looked down and then up at Larry with a glare. "Larry, I'm not in the mood—"

"I go to all the trouble of bringing you dinner, and you won't even take it!" Larry stuck out his lip, "C'mon Nick! You really gonna treat your friends like that?"

Nick groaned, but he stepped back from the door, leaving it open.

The apartment was dark. The streetlights outside the window were the only thing casting any light inside. Even in the dim light, Larry could see that Nick looked rough. He'd ditched the jacket and tie, but otherwise he was still in his work clothes. His shirt looked rumpled and the sleeves were shoved up to his elbows. Even Nick's always styled hair was starting to droop.

Larry breezed into the kitchen, dropping the take-out containers on the fold-up table. He considered flicking on the light, but Nick seemed to be in a dark-broody mood.

There were certainly situations where Larry felt like he struggled to pick up on cues, but helping his best friend wasn't one of them. And part of helping your best friend was knowing when it was time to start fixing things up and when it was time to wallow.

Tonight they would wallow.



"Larry, stop leaving voicemails."

"Well what else am I supposed to do when you keep ignoring my

calls!”

“Maybe take the hint and stop calling.”

“What kind of friend would I be if I did that?”

“A considerate one.”

“Nick—”

“Larry, I’m not in the mood—”

“Phoenix.” The dead silence on the other end was encouraging, so Larry barreled ahead. “I’m not leaving you alone with this. I’m not trying to make you hash everything out right now, but I’m not going to let you shut yourself off.”

The silence hung another beat before Nick’s voice came back, much raspier and worn than before. “Larry I can’t do this right now.”

“We don’t have to do anything—”

“I get your trying to help, but I can’t—”

“He was my friend too, Nick.” Larry’s tone was much harsher than he meant to be, and he expected Nick to hang up on him.

“Fine. Bring take out. I don’t have anything but cereal.”



Larry had very little expertise when it came to offices, but he was pretty sure this qualified as a swanky one. There was even a security officer and everything!

“Unless you have the paperwork for the Engarde case, I’m not in.”

Larry snorted and threw the door open. “Come on, Edgey. That’s no way to greet your best friend!”

Miles’s head snapped up, and there was a second of pure shock on his face before he schooled it back. “...Larry. I hadn’t expected to see you.”

A very quick scan of the, correctly guessed swanky, office, and Larry made up his mind. He crossed his arms and pouted at Miles, “Yeah, kinda rude for you to finally drop back into town and not call me up. What gives, man?!”

“Ah... well...” Miles looked away, reaching up to rub his arm.

Just as expected. “Well, you can make it up to me by coming to lunch.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule—”

“You seem free now.”

“Now? Right now?”

“Yep! No time like the present!” Larry walked over, grabbed Miles’s arm, and marched them out of the office, ignoring Miles’s sputtering as he did. It was less protesting than he expected, and if he had to bet, it was probably cause Miles felt guilty.

Well, no worries there. Not that Larry didn’t care—he absolutely did—but he was no stranger to the desire to just up and leave town one day to avoid your problems. Of course, he’d never quite pulled it off, but still he’d thought about it. So Step One to getting things smoothed out, get Miles’s out of his head about the whole thing.

And Larry was aware that the quickest way to get Miles to apologize—

which would go a long way in patching things up with Nick—was to claim that he'd made the same bad decision too.



Larry's voice was groggy as he mumbled into the phone, "I swear I didn't do it."

"...what?"

Nick's voice. At—he squinted at his bedside clock—3 am. That probably wasn't good.

"Nevermind," Nick was talking fast and possibly slurring his words—or that might just have been because Larry was still half asleep—but he got three things out of it.

1. Nick was panicked.
2. It was about Trucy.
3. He needed Larry.

"I'll be there in 5."

That was a lie, but not an intentional one, and he's pretty sure Nick didn't believe him. When he did arrive at the apartment, it was 3:23am, and Larry was at least awake enough to also start panicking.

Nick whipped the door open the second he knocked. "Hey, I'm so sorry to—"

Larry quickly cut him off with a wave. "No sweat, dude. Wasn't doing anything important." As he shuffled inside, he saw that Nick was

partially dressed and pulling on a jacket.

"Trucy's medicine is on the counter. She ate dinner, so if she can manage, she should eat something for breakfast. She's still called out from school—" Nick scrambled around for a minute, grabbing his wallet and putting on shoes.

Maybe he should have asked questions, but Nick was panicked and clearly in a hurry, so Larry instead opened the door and started to shoo him out. "I've got this. Don't worry. Me and the kid can handle it." He grinned confidently.

Nick stared at him for a minute before managing a smile. "Yeah, I know you can." With that, he hurried off to... wherever.

Larry closed and locked the door, then headed to the kitchen. There was a bag on the counter, probably Trucy's medicine. He tried to read the label but he couldn't figure out what it was for.

"Daddy?" A soft, raspy voice called from the hallway.

Larry started towards it, but paused to grab a glass of water first. Peeking into the room, Trucy was bundled up in bed and propped up by pillows. She blinked at him several times before she seemed to recognize him. He quickly crossed the room and dropped to crouch beside her, handing her the glass. "Hey, kiddo."

She grinned weakly, "Did Daddy finally leave?"

"Yup. Had to shove him out the door though."

She laughed softly and sipped the water. "Good. I knew he was worried about Aunt Maya."

Ah. That would explain why he was panicked. Hopefully it wasn't anything too bad. "What about you? What's got the great Trucy Wright all gravelly-sounding and skipping school."

She grimaced, "Stomach bug. Thought I missed it but," she shrugged.

"Oof. Well, not to worry. I'll be keeping watch and make sure you've got everything you need to get the most out of your vacation from school!"

She giggled again, set the water down, and snuggled back under her blankets. Her eyes were already closed as she muttered, "Thanks, Uncle Larry."



"You've got Larry Butz!"

"... nevermind."

"Wait!" The dial tone didn't sound. "Come on, Edgey! You never call! What's happening? Wait, I'm not a suspect in something, right?!"

Miles's heavy sigh was audible as he responded, "No, not this time."

After a minute, Larry prompted, "So, what'dja need?"

"It's... nothing. I shouldn't have called--"

"Hey, no fair! You help me out all the time. You have to let me return the favor!"

"... I wouldn't say *all* the time..."

"Edgeyyyy--"

"Fine. I was calling to see... if you were free this afternoon."

"Sure. For what? Probably."

Another sigh. "It doesn't matter for what. I could just... use a distraction."

"Oh no worries, I am great at distractions. How do you feel about art museums?"

"Art... yes, that sounds acceptable."

"Awesome! There's a new exhibit at the Devereaux Gallery. I can meet you there in twenty?"

"Alright." There was a pause, and Larry waited instead of hanging up. Quietly, Miles added, "Thank you."





Our Troubles Are All The Same

By Ace

Larry didn't go to bars to drink or pick up hot chicks, to the surprise of...well, most people at least. Maybe even himself. But no, his reason was initially...a bit weirder.

He remembered, as a kid, watching *Cheers* re-runs on his mom's TV late at night after she had gone to sleep with it still on. Maybe he was too young for it, but he liked watching the way everyone greeted each other when they walked in, how everyone knew each other's names for good reasons and talked and spent time together. The idea of having a place where everyone greeted you by name and was happy to see you was kind of comforting, in its own way.

Real life, of course, didn't really follow that example. He'd figured that out a long time ago.

Larry visited this bar semi-regularly now for only one really good reason, and that was because the food was cheap. When he was between jobs, between roommates, between paychecks, this food was affordable and filling. It was so greasy it practically moisturized his hands to pick up one of their burgers, but it was better than nothing at all.

There was another reason though, tonight, and it was the reason Larry kept glancing at the door when he heard it open from his table.

About the fifth time, exactly fifteen minutes before the time Larry had suggested if his watch was right, Miles Edgeworth walked in. He looked around the bar, grimacing as he noticed how dingy and noisy it was, before finally noticing Larry waving to him and blinking in surprise.

"You're early," he observed, sitting across from Larry at the table.

"Our teachers used to say, 'Never expect anything from the Butz!'" Larry answered cheerfully, and Edgey rolled his eyes but his grimace had fallen away to his normal borderline disdain so Larry took it as a victory.

"I don't understand why... *this* was the location you chose," Edgey remarked.

Larry shrugged, answering, "Still waiting on my first paycheck from my new job. It's what I can afford."

Well...that wasn't *completely* honest. If you pointed a gun at Larry's head and told him to give the full reason, he'd admit it was also because he knew that it would make Edgey uncomfortable, to be in such a seedy-looking place. That it was, in some ways, his own bit of revenge. Maybe otherwise he'd have gone for a cheap but half-decent chain restaurant and grabbed an appetizer instead of a meal, skipped the soda for just a water, just to save Edgey the effort of having to lower himself to Larry's admittedly shabby standards.

"I see..." Edgey answered, grabbing one of the laminated menus from behind the napkins and opening it up. "What do you recommend, then?"

Well how about that?

"They make pretty good pasta here," Larry suggested. "Probably nothing as good as you're used to, with all that time in Europe, but it's not as greasy as the burgers." Edgey nodded with only a slight grimace, glancing at the pasta on the menu. "As for drinks, I dunno. You seem like a wine guy, but I don't know if they've got any you'll like."

"Any decent beer at least?" He glanced up at Larry and sighed at his surprised expression. "Don't look so surprised. I grew up mostly in Germany."

Larry nodded in understanding. "You'd have to ask the bartender what's good. I don't drink."

It was Edgey's turn to be surprised, his eyes widening slightly at the casual admission. Larry could see the questions that were building up, but it seemed Edgey wasn't willing to ask them yet, instead turning his attention back to the menu and glancing at the drinks.

"Hmm...I'll just get water then."

Larry waved to a waitress he recognized, Kennedy, who hurried over and took Edgey's order.

"Your usual?" she asked him cheerfully once she had written down Edgey's, and she chuckled as Larry shot her finger guns and wrote down his order. "Alright, we'll get this food out to you shortly!"

As Kennedy walked away, Edgey shot Larry a look.

"What's that for?" Larry asked, confused.

"Should you be flirting with someone who's working?"

Larry snickered at that. "Maybe look at the button on her lanyard when

she comes back, Edgey." Then, before Edgey could ask what he meant, he added, "Anyway, I'm not gonna flirt with anyone right now. This is us catching up after all! Edgey and the Butz, a duo rarely seen!"

Edgey blinked, then nodded, seemingly slightly embarrassed. "Yes, that's...true, I suppose. We haven't seen each other since not long after..." He went quiet at that, and Larry guessed where his mind had gone.

"I've still got my copy of the photo," Larry added cheerfully. "Oh, and I've got that photo from Halloween that your dad took of us in our Signal Samurai costumes, if you want a copy."

Edgey went still at that, eyes wide as he looked up. "You do?"

"Yeah, I keep all those old photos. You can come look through them sometime, pick whatever you want a copy of." Kennedy walked back over with a glass of water and a Sprite with no ice, setting the drinks down on their table. "Hey Ken, poor Edgey here thought I was flirting with you."

"Hah! Not in a million years, Butz," she replied, holding up her lanyard that proudly held a lesbian flag button. Edgey squinted at it, before glancing away, looking a bit embarrassed. "How's the last girlfriend anyway? Uh...Trisha?"

"Ugh, don't remind me. She dumped me over text and stole my good frying pan when she left."

"Oof. Well, better luck next time! I'll bring your food out when it's done."

"Thank you," Edgey answered with a nod.

"Yeah, thanks Ken!"

As Kennedy headed to handle other tables, Larry grabbed his glass and began sipping his Sprite. "So, I bet you're wondering why I brought you here."

Edgey, who had also been sipping his drink, paused, giving Larry a wary look. "I thought it was to catch up, like you said before."

"Well duh, obviously," Larry said. "But I want to talk about Nick for a bit, alright?"

Edgey, concerned, asked, "What about Wright?"

Larry shrugged, explaining, "You know, he's worse than me about getting caught up in stuff. That bs with the rich weirdo who murdered his boss wasn't the first time he'd been framed for murder. His ex-girlfriend was a piece of work."

"...Oh?" Edgey looked alarmed. He apparently didn't know that.

"Yeah, I met her a couple times and if you want me to be honest, she was shady even before the murder. Most of the time she was really sweet, so in love with Nick it was embarrassing. Sometimes though, she got *weird*. Shady weird. And then she'd go right back to being sweet next time you saw her, like nothing happened.

"Nick didn't notice. He was head over heels, practically picking out flowers for their wedding and deciding on the names of their kids. Then, one day, she tried to poison him."

Edgey sucked in a breath at that, eyes wide.

"Her ex, Doug something or other, stopped it, got into a fight warning

Nick and everything. After that, she killed Doug and framed Nick for it. And Nick...he was so stupid in love that he didn't believe she had done anything right until she showed her true colors."

Larry set his glass down. Thinking about Dahlia just made him angry, and he didn't think he was strong enough to shatter a glass in one hand but he really didn't want to find out.

"I..." Edgey's voice shook. "I had no idea."

"Yeah, Nick was heartbroken. Even with how mean he's gotten since, he was always a bleeding heart. He started hardcore studying law eventually, but for a while he was the most messed up I'd ever seen him. It was really terrifying."

Larry was legally able to drink only about a month before the trial. He swore never to drink another drop of alcohol only weeks after it. If he could afford a therapist, maybe he'd tell them what happened, why he stopped drinking so soon after starting, why Nick stopped too. But he couldn't, and if Nick didn't want to say anything, then Larry wouldn't either. He would probably die with that knowledge before sharing it with anyone else.

He told Edgey his perspective on what happened with Dahlia, and things that could have been read in the news. The things after, the things that only he and Nick knew, those would stay between the two of them.

"And that was the most messed up I'd ever seen him," Larry continued, "until last year."

He watched as Edgey averted his eyes and knew that he was starting to figure it out.

Because Larry liked to consider Edgey his friend, even if he wasn't all that sure Edgey thought the same. But just because he dropped out of high school didn't mean he couldn't do basic math. He had known Edgey for a few months before any of them had hit double digits, and he had known Nick from diapers all the way to now.

Would he feel bad if he had to pick between the two? Yes. Was there any doubt he'd pick Nick in a heartbeat?

Absolutely. Fucking. Not.

"Nick called me, the night he saw your letter," Larry explained. "Full panic mode. They were still searching for you, but he had already jumped straight to the worst. Not that you could really blame him. You know, I'm pretty dumb sometimes, but even I can get what 'choosing death' is supposed to mean." He took a deep breath, shuddering as he thought back to that day.

"He didn't cry, that was the terrifying part. He was angry, he was meaner than usual, and I did my best but I couldn't fix it. Couldn't bring you back from the dead. Couldn't do anything but stick by him and make sure he didn't go anywhere either."

Larry met Edgey's eyes for a moment, before Edgey averted them again.

"You broke him in ways I didn't think he *could* be broken anymore, Edgey."

It was silent at their table for a good, long moment. Larry wondered if this was the moment that Edgey decided they really weren't friends. That it was time to stop wasting effort on him.

Edgey was the first to speak, eventually.

"The letter wasn't a lie at first."

That shocked Larry out of any remaining scraps of righteous fury.

"What?"

Edgey grit his teeth, before taking a deep breath and releasing it as a sigh. "I wrote that letter intending to see it through."

...Shit.

"Shit," Larry muttered out loud. If something smells—never expect anything from—it was just like the Butz to think he knew what he was doing only to end up regretting it. "Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"No," Edgey interrupted, shaking his head. "No, you...you have a right to be angry. For all that it felt necessary to be away, that didn't make it right. That didn't diminish the hurt I caused." His right arm clutched his left elbow, a nervous tic that hadn't been there when they were kids. "I hurt you and Wright with what I did, and I'm sorry."

Larry had gone into this meeting fully intending to rip into the great Miles Edgeworth, but now he felt like a complete jackass.

"Didn't give me the right to give you shit over an actual suicide attempt," Larry answered, ashamed.

"It wasn't like you knew."

"Doesn't make it okay."

"Your food's ready!" Kennedy's cheerful voice rang out, and the tense atmosphere wavered as she brought a tray over, setting down a plate of pasta and a basket with a hamburger and fries inside. "Let me

know if either of you need anything else!”

“Thanks Ken,” Larry managed, and she glanced at him, her customer service smile wavering for a moment. She didn’t say anything though, simply took the tray away with a nod and headed back towards the kitchen.

The two of them picked at their food for a bit. Larry didn’t feel particularly hungry after that revelation. That this entire meeting was a bust actually. He had gone in intending to give Edgey shit for the hell he’d put Nick through and instead he’d harassed his hopefully formerly suicidal friend over something that had probably been even worse for him. This was absolutely the moment Edgey was going to be done with him, and he deserved it.

“How much do you know about SL-9?” Edgey asked after a moment.

“It’s one of those case numbers, right?” Larry answered, confused. “I don’t know what those mean, man, I’m not a lawyer.”

“Joe Darke.”

Larry was grateful he wasn’t eating, because he probably would have choked on his food. “That guy who killed five people in one night?!” Larry wasn’t a lawyer, but he did look at the news occasionally. Not to mention one of his exes was really into true crime podcasts, something Larry couldn’t relate to after basically living through an episode of one.

“Yes. I received his case after the previous prosecutor was killed, and Darke was sentenced to death. Except the one murder he didn’t commit, the murder of the previous prosecutor, was one I charged him with.”

Larry winced. On one hand, he wasn’t inclined to feel too bad for a guy who had murdered five people. On the other hand, even he could tell that

was a slippery slope in an already messed up system.

“I was given faulty evidence, but I didn’t look closely enough. I should have. Things hadn’t added up, I wasn’t given everything I should have been. But I didn’t care. All that mattered was winning.” He stared at his food, refusing to look at Larry. “I didn’t learn about my failure for two years, and all I could think afterward was how many people I must have sent to prison on faulty evidence. How many of those people were truly innocent when I condemned them? I didn’t kill my father, but I killed many others instead. Not directly, but their blood is on my hands.”

“...Dude.”

Edgey looked like he wanted to melt into his seat and disappear. Like he was waiting for Larry’s judgment.

Honestly, Larry had judged him enough already.

“I literally made the murder weapon that was used to kill my girlfriend,” Larry admitted, and Edgey flinched, startled out of his attempt at disappearing. “No, it’s worse. It was two of a matching set. I gave the other to Nick’s boss, as a thank you for helping prove my innocence after Nick’s first trial. That one ended up killing her.”

“...The Thinker clock.”

Larry shuddered at the reminder.

It wasn’t his first work using electronics, but it was probably the most complicated. The programming hadn’t been his work, he’d gotten a friend at his job at the time to help him out, but he had put the whole thing together himself. He even got some noise complaints from his

celebration when he got it to work. The second one was the one he gave to Cindy, the design perfected, and she'd loved it. He'd felt so proud as he taught her how to set it, because he knew how she traveled for her job. Teaching her that ended up saving his life, though it didn't save hers.

He didn't make sculptures anymore. He'd taken a long break from art after Cindy's death, feeling nauseous every time he tried. Dating Kiyance, in hindsight, was a mistake that left him with useless garbage cluttering up a closet in his apartment. Selling hot dogs was a boring and lonely job that left him feeling worse, because he didn't even have coworkers to share the misery with. Getting to help Edgey in court was probably the only thing he was proud of from that point.

In that brief period of time when everything almost felt fine again, with Edgey free and clear and Nick taking a break from cases but otherwise okay, he'd started painting instead of sculpting, and it was like some bleeding wound in him finally scabbed over enough to let him create again.

Paintings weren't very good murder weapons, at least.

"...I guess you understand more than I thought," Edgey remarked quietly, poking his pasta with his fork absently.

Larry nodded. For once he had nothing to say.

Neither Edgey nor Larry had killed someone before, but Larry sure as hell felt like a murderer sometimes. And he guessed Edgey did too.

He still had nightmares about Cindy, ones where she told him she hated him and that he'd killed her. Ones where she told him she loved him and that he'd killed her—because somehow that was worse than if she had hated him. Ones where she just stared at him with dead eyes, as if waiting for something Larry didn't know how to give because he didn't know anything, he didn't know what she thought of him and what she

wanted and whether she'd ever really cared or not.

Ones where she was dead at his feet, Nick's boss slumped against the wall nearby, and he had the clock in his hands, the voice of his coworker ringing through the tinny speaker. *I think the time is one o'clock*. The blood was on his clothes, on the floor, on his hands, drowning him because they wouldn't be dead if it weren't for him and his stupid clocks.

Larry wasn't technically a murderer, but he might as well have given the guy who killed Nick's boss a knife, might as well have unlocked the door for Cindy's killer.

"...How do you manage it?" Edgey asked, finally looking up from his pasta again.

Larry shrugged. "I just...keep going. Never really learned how to stop." He hesitated, before admitting, "I can't really talk about it with Nick. Best case scenario is he doesn't get it. Worst case scenario, he does get it and that's another can of worms he has to deal with. He's already a big enough mess."

Edgey nodded at that. "And yet, nothing will stop him from getting involved anyway, if he notices."

"Good thing he doesn't notice everything. Not enough Nick to go around, as much as he tries."

"It's as infuriating as it is admirable."

"I'll drink to that," Larry agreed, taking a sip of his Sprite. "What about you? How are you holding up?"

Edgey frowned, poking absently at the noodles on his plate. "I've been attending therapy remotely, due to my travels. It has helped with addressing some issues I hadn't been willing to consider. I was also prescribed antidepressants, though we are still adjusting my dosage currently. I'm less inclined to consider what I wrote in that note, at the very least."

"That's good." Larry set his glass down again and grinned. "You're alive and you're getting better. Things are looking up!"

There was a pause, as Edgey blinked at his pasta, his frown taking a thoughtful edge to it. "I suppose I hadn't thought of it that way. It still feels like...things are moving slowly. Like I'm not where I should be yet."

"You think anyone is?" Larry asked. "Seriously, I never feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be. Sometimes literal starving artist and all that. Then again, you always had big plans about what you were going to be and how you were going to get there. Maybe the fact that there's not a step-by-step guide to being okay is what's messing with your head over it. Or maybe you're just not effortlessly good at it. Like origami."

"Don't bring that up," Edgey said sternly. "It was humiliating."

Larry snickered. "Aw, c'mon Edgey! It wasn't..." He paused. "Okay, so it was that bad, but it was like the first thing you weren't good at on the first try. First time I could actually do something better than you. Hell, girls swoon over you despite the fact that you're the least interested man I've ever seen."

"There's a good reason for that," he muttered under his breath, and Larry pretended not to hear. He'd let that truth come out when Edgey was ready.

(Heh. Come out.)

"Whatever. The journey is more important than the destination and all that," Larry continued, after a moment of tracking down the thread of conversation. "Can't give yourself shit for not being all the way there yet, or you're just gonna give up before you get there. Don't need to make the whole thing harder on yourself."

Edgey blinked at him for a moment, opening and closing his mouth before finally shaking his head and turning his attention back to his pasta. "That might be the smartest thing you've ever said."

"Yeah don't expect any more, I can throw out one of those maybe once a week. *If I'm lucky*," Larry joked, and Edgey let out an amused huff.

"I suppose I should feel lucky to have borne witness to such a rare event."

Larry snickered at that, and observed a bit proudly that the expression on Edgey's face was practically a smile.

The two settled into a more comfortable quiet as they started digging into their food. It seemed the pasta was up to Edgey's standards after all, because he finished it before Larry was even half done with his burger. Today was just full of surprises, wasn't it?

"When are you going back to Europe?" Larry asked after finishing his food.

Edgey shrugs. "In a few days. I have to finish paperwork with the prosecutor's office, and Wright and Miss Fey have both insisted I have dinner with them the night before I leave."

"You know how long you'll be gone this time?"

“Not really.” Edgey glanced at his empty plate, as if mourning the late pasta now that he didn’t have any to poke with a fork. “I intend to spend some time in Germany, studying the law reforms there. After that...there is always something new to learn.”

Larry could respect that, even if he didn’t fully get it. “Gimme your phone number, then. So I don’t have to contact you through Nick again.”

Edgey rolled his eyes, before holding out a hand expectantly. Larry passed him his phone and watched as he created a new contact on the device.

“This is not an invitation to harass me at all hours of the day,” Edgey warned, narrowing his eyes at Larry as he saved the contact and passed the phone back. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“Chill, man, I’m not that bad,” Larry assured him. “Unless once a week is too much for you. Then sucks to be you man, you’re joining Nick on the ‘still kicking’ texting list. I’d make it a group chat but that might *actually kill* Nick’s brick.”

“Yes, it probably would.”

When Kennedy brought the ticket, Edgey took it, giving Larry a glare that dared him to try and argue. Larry wasn’t Nick though, and he especially wasn’t the kind of person to turn down free food. He hadn’t been lying about waiting for that first paycheck anyway.

Once the food was paid for, Larry walked Edgey out to his car, waving to Kennedy as they left.

“...Are you available tomorrow evening?” Edgey asked. “I would be interested in looking at those pictures you mentioned.”

And Larry figured things would be okay.



Butz

Hey, Nick! Guessss who got
a job as a painter?!?



Transmutation in Art

By GABRIELKIT

No less than five hours after the conclusion of Ron DeLite's trial, Larry quits his job. It's an informal little thing; he doesn't give a notice period, nor does he care enough to stick around and help find a replacement. He's got no doubt that the security firm will pick up another loser to replace the one they just lost, and he doesn't feel obligated to them the same way he has never felt a sense of belonging to any of his past jobs. For a while, now, he's been floating in the in-between—between jobs, between girlfriends, between shitty apartments, the only consistency in his life coming from the takeout place he frequents every Saturday night. One large pepperoni pizza, a case of Bud Light, and a Sunday morning headache that started to feel like a routine long ago.

He sits on the floor of his apartment, staring intently at the crumbs on his floor. He hasn't vacuumed here in months, and he doesn't intend to start now, not on a Saturday night with his laptop open and unmoving on his resume; tomorrow, he'll try and polish it, send it off to wherever it needs to go, and he'll no doubt end up in another dead end job, fated to cross paths with his old best friends if only to serve as a cautionary tale of disappointment for them. Whenever he thinks about those days—the *good old days*, he calls them—he's hit with an intense pang of something that feels bitterly close to nostalgia, without the silver lining of knowing that, in a way, they all made it out of there. He won't claim to know everything Edgeworth has gone through, and the last time he saw Phoenix before college, he was off with grand dreams of becoming an artist.

They've changed. And what of him? Has he changed, too? Or is he just stuck, the same old Larry Butz, *most likely to go nowhere in life*?

The pizza tastes of nothing, the beer gives him an uncomfortable buzz, and he's forced to think about who he is and where he fits into the world. He had a real chance back there, in that trial, to finally be helpful to someone he still regards as a very dear friend, but he'd ruined it all again—he has a habit of doing that. Sometimes, he thinks that there are people who try so hard to be good that they don't end up being *bad*, they just end up being *pathetic*, and if there's ever been a poster boy for failure, it's him. If only he could have been better at a job that didn't mean anything to him, he might have been able to rush in at the last minute with the evidence that Phoenix needed, not to *steal the spotlight* per se, but... oh, he doesn't know. To be useful? To be needed? To be anything other than a dead weight being carried along by those who have already moved on from schoolyard fights and old television shows with matching keyrings?

Maybe he should vacuum after all. It might give him a sense of clarity to sit in a clean apartment, instead of one that smells of lukewarm pizza and dust. He's not even sure where his vacuum *is*, but it can't have gotten far in a small studio apartment, and it only takes him five minutes to find it, tucked away in a closet. It's a heavy, cumbersome thing, and he has to root around in the closet to pull it out. His hands are clumsy as they pull at the body of the vacuum, and something in front of it, blocking it off, becomes dislodged; it's a wooden box, and the contents spill out across the floor.

He knows what it is instantly.

Forgetting about the vacuum entirely, he carefully picks up the items that have fallen out, trying his hardest not to look at them as he puts

them back inside. It's a time capsule, one that he'd made in elementary school before Edgeworth had moved away; the three of them had sat together in the sunshine, promising to meet up at this exact spot after graduation. That had never happened—especially not for Larry, who hadn't even graduated high school in the first place. But here it is, clear as day, a box full of memories that was supposed to be something so happy, and now just sits in a closet, gathering dust, a bitter reminder of his existence as a disappointment.

He can't *not* look at it, though. Bringing it back through to where he has been sitting since he quit his job, he just holds it for a moment, running his hands over the lid, scared to open it again after he hastily closed it only a minute ago. What is in there that he has to fear? Memories of a childhood that he looks back on with fondness and wistfulness alike?

Taking a deep breath, he opens the lid, and the dust near-chokes him. He opens another beer, swallowing half of it before turning his attention back to the time capsule. The first thing inside is a photograph, and he distinctly remembers that they'd taken a bunch of them on a disposable camera; he'd forgotten all about it for two weeks afterwards, and had only gone to get the photos developed after a third reminder from Phoenix. Whether Phoenix and Edgeworth kept their prints, he doesn't know, but something tells him that he's the only one of the now-defunct trio still holding onto the glory days of a hopeful youth. But he just looks at them all, smiling, and wonders where it all went wrong. Had it been doomed the moment Edgeworth moved away, or had Larry's mere presence itself cursed the friendship from the get-go, his innate ability to disappoint putting a finite timer on the longevity of their triad? He realises that none of them smile the way they used to; Phoenix must have gotten braces sometime after elementary school, because he doesn't have his tooth gap anymore, and Edgeworth's smile is all but non-existent these days. Carrying the photo with him to his small bathroom, Larry holds it up to the

light and tries to smile into the mirror, desperate to match how he looked when he was younger—*happier*—but it doesn't reach his eyes and he knows that as long as things carry on the way they are, it never will.

He goes back to the time capsule and fishes out various pieces of cheap plastic. It's all Signal Samurai merch, and some of it will probably be worth quite a bit in the next few decades, but he'll never sell it on, no matter how dire his financial situation is. These things—these tiny, flimsy things—might be plastic now, but when he was a child, they were swords, they were cars, they were rocket ships and everything else fantastic that a creative mind could come up with. And where has that child gone, that old Larry Butz who might never have excelled in mathematics or sciences, but who could look at a stupid piece of plastic and see an adventure for himself and his friends? Perhaps he's trapped like a restless spirit inside this time capsule, a little pocket of a memory in which he was loved and his mind was not an afterthought.

And then, right at the bottom, Larry sees where he is—that bright child who had seen the world in hopeful primary colours. He's immortalised in one of his own drawings, with his arms around his best friends. The crayon that makes up his features is messy, but there's an element of technical skill there that Larry feels surprised came from his own hands. It doesn't feel right that a drawing of him and his best friends should be locked away in the dusty cupboard of a shitty studio apartment, and he smooths out the wrinkles in the paper with careful hands, promising himself that he'll find a fridge magnet for it tomorrow.

But that's it, isn't it? He always tells himself that he's going to do things *tomorrow*, or *next week*, or *when the time is right*. That time is *now*, has always been now, and it's taken him a harsh awakening from

his childhood self to realise it. He had been an artist, once, so why not do so again? Why not take an impossible risk on a childhood dream? The alternative is dragging himself along from dead end job to dead end job, so it's not like he has much to lose.

Suddenly emboldened by the beer he's been nursing, he starts searching online for any artists looking for apprentices. Most of the listings require either previous experience or at least a well put-together portfolio, but one of them takes his eye—tucked away on page five of some budding artist website, he sees the name and knows that it's his salvation.

Elise Deauxnim.



Elise Deauxnim is a strange woman to work for. She hadn't batted an eye at Larry's suggestion that he should adopt half of her name as his new alias, but she tuts at him in a strange, disappointed-mother kind of way every time he turns up late. To her, Larry realises, the pursuit of art is more important than her individual identity, which is why she was so happy to give it up for her protégé.

A fresh start is nice, though. Elise travels a lot for work, getting inspiration from every place she can, and as such, Larry had signed off on an early termination of his apartment lease, moving all of his important belongings into her van to stay on the road with her and learn on the go. Doing so had forced him to confront that most of the material possessions in his life are just that—material *nothingness*. He had sold his laptop and bought a new sketchbook and some expensive charcoals, he had trimmed down his wardrobe to just the bare essentials, and had packed the time capsule safely at the bottom of his backpack before leaving everything else behind. Living a non-materialistic life is new to him, but not entirely unwelcome, because he feels like he really has a purpose now; everything

that had been holding him back is in the past, and he has the chance to continue forwards as a new man.

He learns everything from her. From the soft, busy nostalgia of John Constable's paintings of England, to the abrupt modernity of Michael Cheval's absurdity, he takes dutiful notes on everything that Elise says. But he can never quite replicate the work of the artists that he admires—even his simpler drawings, plucked from ideas right out of Elise's notebook, fall flat when compared to the originals. And still he tries; late night after late night until he barely sleeps more than three consecutive hours, desperate to create something that will feel not like a legacy per se, but at least something he can be proud of when he faces his friends again.

Of course, Elise, in her otherworldly way, never tells him that he is a failure.

Over time, he starts to think that he might have some promise as an artist, after all. Even if he still struggles to produce work inspired by any other artist, his original drawings are better than ever. He tries every medium, draws everything he can see, but he always returns to the same old coloured pencils and the familiar format of three things against a vast background. Three vases, two together, one teetering dangerously on the edge of a table. Three flowers, two tall, one growing underneath them. Three people without faces.

Elise praises his unique artistic eye, and he feels something he's never felt before. A sense of pride; not the childish pride of his youth, when he would be proud of his ability to shout the loudest or run the fastest, but something different. Something innate. Something that he's worked for, for the first time in his life, and now he has things to show for it—a wall of drawings at the back of Elise's van, fluttering in

the wind every time they drive down the highway with the windows down.

He had learned, right back when he met Elise, not to question her flights of fancy. If Elise says they are going to Paris, Larry nods, and they are at the Louvre within the week. If Elise says they are undertaking a vow of silence to better understand their muses, Larry nods, and they do not speak a word for three days. It's a shock to his system to be dragged along with the whimsy of a creative mind, but it's a welcome one. They have a routine these days, where Elise will write and Larry will look over her shoulder, doodling scenes from her stories until he settles on one that he will make into a bigger piece. And they travel. A lot. Always moving forward, never leaving a trace behind. He feels like a living ghost, observing without affecting, drawing without writing, growing without changing.

So, when Elise tells him that they'll be taking a trip to Hazakura Temple, Larry doesn't question it.

The Temple is high up in the mountains, a place of sanctuary for spirit mediums. He's never been too good with the cold, but where the old Larry Butz would have complained until he found a warm bed somewhere, the new Laurice Deauxnim considers the below-freezing temperature to be another tool for character building. Within the first three days at Hazakura Temple, he's already burned through a full sketchbook, filling each page with sketches of the scenery or Elise, hiding three figures in the background of each piece. They're closer these days, the three figures, and in some of his art pieces, they even touch hands. If they had faces, they would smile, but drawing faces is beyond his skill level—not because he doesn't trust himself to accurately replicate the human bone structure, but because he doesn't feel confident enough in his old friendships to try and portray their souls.

Just as he's settling in fully, having spent the past few days getting his

bearings around the Temple, Larry spots someone out of the corner of his eye. A mirage. A muse. A phantom from the past, here to either taunt him or praise him for his progress.

Phoenix Wright.

Squinting in the harsh mountain sunlight, Larry focuses on the form until it becomes more visible. Phoenix is approaching, with two spirit mediums in tow, and Larry realises that it isn't a trick of the light at all—his old friend really is here.

And Larry is unsure if he's ready for it.

After all, he's imagined meeting Phoenix and Edgeworth again many times over the past few months, but it has always been a fantasy set in the far future, when he's an established artist of his own merit and has built a name for himself. Not here; not now. Not when he still has so much to learn, and so much growing to do to be anywhere near the level of those who left him behind.

Phoenix is saying something, shouting his name maybe, and Laurice becomes Larry once more—Larry Butz, the coward, always running away from things he's not quite ready for. No matter how many times Elise has told him that a true artist is never ready, that the making of the man comes from how he deals with unforeseen situations, he just can't deal with this right now. But he's too slow, no longer the lightning-fast child who could beat his friends in a race, and he collides headfirst into Phoenix's chest in his attempt to scarper.

"Sorry!" He says, trying to hide his face. "Gotta run!"

"Hey, wait a minute," Phoenix says. "Larry?"

Taking a deep breath, Larry tries to remember all the good he's done in these past few months. Everything he's learned. The changes he's made not just for himself, but for Phoenix too; his vow to become a better man. Whether his best attempts bear any fruit, he doesn't know, but he can't run any longer—he has to stand up and try to make something of the friendship he's been trying so hard to salvage.

He sticks his hand out for Phoenix to shake.

"Nice to meet you," he says, locking eyes with his former best friend and hoping that he's done enough to be recognised as an equal. "I'm Laurice Deauxnim."



An Insecure Turnabout

By Red Acted

The club Larry dragged Miles to this evening is far too loud. The baseline of the EDM blaring on all the speakers is so oppressive, he feels it in his eardrums and heartbeat. Not to mention, lights might as well not exist. Flashes of red or blue in corners or along walls roaming the floor, not bright and never staying still. It's migraine material. Why did he agree to come? "Larry."

The man in question, Larry Butz, is slumped against the opposing couch, tears building in his eyes. Oh no. Is he going to bawl? Yes, he's had bad luck 'finding love' all night, but is that worth crying over? *Here?* This is a club; it's on the same level as tinder. Maybe worse. Then again, Larry cries about tinder dates, too...and now he's wiping his eyes against his ruddy sleeve jacket. *I hope I have a handkerchief*, Miles thinks, rummaging through his pockets. Larry will go for the cravat if not given anything else. *Found it.* "Here," Miles says, but the unexpected happens.

"Man, you SUCK!!!" Larry jumps out of his seat and points at Miles' forehead; his arm wavers as he cries.

"Excuse me?" How is this Miles' fault, exactly?

Now he's kicking his feet like he's never aged past seven years old. *Certainly won't 'find love' that way.* "You're a terrible wingman!! You've done nothing to help me all night!"

Is...is that what he was invited here for? To wingman? In what universe does Miles Edgeworth, a man who prides himself on his cravat collection, look like he has a good wingman game? He hasn't even dated anyone! He doesn't go to bars! "What did you expect from me, exactly?"

"Like, you could have used your super popularity with women—" Miles' *what* now—"to like...lure 'em over here!" Ah, so he's the bait. "And then introduce them to your *best* friend and ideal boyfriend material: me!"

"Oh, of course." How charming. What else did he expect? Miles is here to sell Larry's image to unsuspecting women. Truly, wingmanning is a dubiously ethical job. "I exist to advertise for you."

"No! You're here to support a friend!" In his quest to convince women to date him. Yes, well established. Is this a thing people do often? Or is it just Larry? The club is jam-packed, mere centimeters of space between its occupants. They all shout over one another when they're not...dancing. Does that count as dancing? It certainly doesn't resemble the waltz von Karma instilled into him. *I don't understand why Larry would take me here.*

Larry says something else, his face markedly flat; it's not an expression Miles thought Larry was capable of. His words are drowned out by the thrumming base and nearby drunken laughter, but Miles can just barely process the last of his words. "You can't even do that much. I'm going home."

And then Larry is gone, weaving through bloated throngs of people like a man who has downed four beers and isn't especially good at holding his liquor, even though he drank half of one fruity cocktail. *His*

tolerance is usually better than this. Moreover, where is he going? Surely, he's not leaving; he came in Miles' car. Does he intend to walk? Pay for public transit? Inevitably get in trouble? Before he knows it, Miles is off the couch, haphazardly maneuvering through the crowd, not caring about the shoulders he knocks against, or the feet he steps on, or the cries of annoyed patrons.

The streetlights and storefronts in Los Angeles are too bright, despite being after 10pm. A consequence of spending hours in a dark club. Miles squints, adjusting to the new scenery—to the sounds of pedestrian traffic and speeding cars, before his eyes lock on a familiar orange jacket storming away from the building. *And also my car.* With a sigh, he speeds after Larry, grabbing him by the wrist. "My car is the other way."

"I'm not taking your—hey wait!" Larry protests as he's dragged back the other way, his free arm flailing behind him.

"Yes, you are." Like hell Miles is letting Larry get into another argument with a bus driver because he accidentally lost his wallet down the sewer drain for the tenth time.

"Dude, let go!"

Miles does, only once they arrive back at his car. He opens the door. "In." Larry's eyes dart left, like he's about to run again, so Miles lightly shoves him. "*In.* You're not getting arrested on my watch."

"Fine!"

Larry falls into the plush seat, and Miles shuts the door behind him. As soon as he's also inside, he's asked, "Why do you care, anyway?"

What kind of question is that? "Did you drink more than I thought?" He could have sworn it was just the one drink, but maybe he wasn't paying

attention—

"Ugh, shut up. Just take me home! I don't wanna be here longer than I gotta!" Larry's seatbelt clicks violently into place.

But Miles leaves the car off and watches as Larry avoids his gaze. One beat. Two.

"What are you *waiting* for?"

"Are you...upset...?"

Larry doesn't dignify that with an answer. Maybe that's deserved; the answer is obvious. But what could it be?

Is it—another sigh. "Is it because I didn't wingman?"

Again, no response. Did he hit the nail on the head? *It was where the argument began...*

Still, Miles doesn't believe he did anything wrong. After all—"You can't have honestly expected me to help with your misguided endeavors to find romance—"

"Ugh, there you go again!" Larry buries his face in his hands. "You don't get it! Why do I even bother?"

What is he talking about? *What am I not getting?* Even cases against Wright have had him less mystified. "Then what is it?" What could have upset Larry so much he tried to walk home? So incensed he's only barely keeping himself from kicking the glove compartment to Miles' car?

No answer.

"I can't possibly understand what you haven't told me."

"But I *did* tell you!" Now Larry is glaring. "You can't even support a friend." Then he snuffles, followed by a hiccup. And another. *Oh no. Is he...?* He was always prone to loud, emotional outbursts, and yet, although tears bubble in his eyes, they do not fall. Although he yells at the smallest provocation, when he asks, "Are we even friends...?" it is just above a whisper.

Oh. *Oh*. The severity of the question sinks like a barge with a cracked hull in Miles' stomach. This is his fault. Yes, it's about the wingmanning, but it's not *just* about the wingmanning. It was never just about the venue, or the request. "Larry—"

"Never mind! Forget it!" Larry fidgets with the clasp of his seatbelt, struggling to free himself. "How do you get this dumb thing—"

"Larry Butz," Miles states, with the severity of a strict teacher's command. It's enough that Larry's brown eyes bold back to him. "Do you honestly think I would let some acquaintance bring me to a seedy club?"

"No..."

"Do you think I would let *anyone* make me sit uncomfortably going deaf for the pleasure of watching them chat up a stranger they've just met?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then why would you be the exception to this?"

"I—" Larry starts, and then stops. For seconds disguised as minutes, he gapes like a fish forcing itself to breathe like a man as he struggles to come up with an articulate comeback. The puffy red eyes with clinging tears only worsen the impression he's dying. Finally, he settles on a limp yell, "But

then I don't get it!"

"What is there not to get?"

"Why do you act like that all the time, then?"

"Like what?"

"Like you hate me!" Bang! Larry's fist collides with the window, punctuating his words. "You always act like I'm an idiot whenever I'm around, and you never want to do anything with me!"

Ah. Well...yes. That...that would look like Miles hates him. Of course, part of that is accounted for by the times Larry has interfered with an investigation or trial, but that isn't the core issue. Even if he's often unhelpful, sometimes deliberately, it wouldn't justify the disparaging remarks he's made in response. There are healthier ways to manage irritation, as his therapist would say. *I have not been doing the best job of listening to her advice*. Good prosecutors—no, good *friends* would not stoop to belittling their friend's intelligence when they're frustrated with their behavior. Managing emotions was never one of Miles' skills; communication isn't either.

Right now, Miles' brows are knit into one. When paired with his default frown, he looks like he's glowering, like he's outraged Larry dare cry in his pricey car. No wonder Larry attempted to flee. Miles closes his eyes. What was it Dr. Beatty said? Inhale.

'Tense every muscle in your body.'

He starts with his toes and works up through his legs. Progressive muscle relaxation works wonders.

'Hold to the count of five—'

—*three...four...five*—

'—and then release.'

Exhale. Miles can feel the space between his eyebrows again. Much better. "I'm sorry."

"Huh?" Now with his eyes open, Miles sees Larry opened the door, because it hangs half open with one of his hands still gripping the handle. Surprised, Larry lets go, and it swings back closed. Clack.

"I'm sorry. I have, on numerous occasions, treated you poorly." For now, Miles won't gripe on what is and isn't helpful behavior in a criminal setting. The only trial occurring is one of his ability to be honest. "It's...not fair of me, even if I'm frustrated."

Larry blinks, then scrubs away the unfallen tears in his eyes with his jacket and blinks again. His mouth hangs half open. *Is it really that shocking? Am I that bad at this?* The streets of Los Angeles are always cacophonous, with bustling crowds and endless traffic, but the bellowing horns and singing sidewalk drunks can't puncture the bubble of silence in Miles' car. Until Larry breaks it with a question: "Are you really Edgy?"

Miles' first instinct is to make a dry quip. This is also his second instinct, but he bites his tongue and crushes every last one between his teeth before uttering a single word. *Not the time for that*; it's actually the problem. Another instance of him only speaking cruelty, as though he oozes contempt and loathing. But just answering with 'yes' feels lackluster and silly, so Miles says, "I am excruciatingly aware that I am terrible at....being vulnerable."

"No, seriously, are you? Because the Edgy I know would—"

"Larry." Wait, no, wrong—

"Yup, there he is!" Larry grins, broad and goofy. It's the one he's most known for, the one that takes over his face like the only thought he's capable of is unadulterated glee. "Wow. It really is you! You suck at this, man."

Don't remind me. "I know."

"That's okay though! Me too." Larry's smile falters, slipping one size smaller, more insecure but still happy. It's a strange expression on him, given he usually emotes in extremes, but it's not unwelcome. "I uh....should have realized you wouldn't wanna come to a bar to pick up girls. You wear a tissue pack on your neck!"

"It's called a—"

"Yeah, a crabot or javat or whatever—" *close enough*—"just listen!"

"Go on."

"Like. I'm not very smart. I just go where my heart says, and that's usually right into trouble. Most people get sick of that and leave." Larry slumps against the chair and stares out the windshield. "The only people who haven't are you and Nick, and well...you know Nick. He's the kinda guy who will go along with anything."

Miles hums in agreement. "I would not be surprised if that man ended up with a literal child one day."

"Right?" Larry says. "But as I was saying, you're not Nick. You're kinda like...the anti-Nick. You won't put up with anything!" *I'm not that bad...right?* "So I kinda thought...you'd get sick of me and leave also."

Ah. Of course. That's all Miles' fault. "Larry—"

"But you're not! I mean, you already tried abandoning everyone a couple of years ago, but here you are!" Larry snickers to himself, and Miles keeps back another sigh. *I wouldn't describe it like that, but...sure.* No point rehashing the specifics of...that right now, either. "But mostly just...you don't put up with anything! If you wanted me gone, you'd've done it already, right?" He glances at Miles with another carefree smile.

In a response unfamiliar and awkward, Miles' lips quirk upward in turn. His own smile is lopsided, and he's all but given up on eye contact (choosing to stare at the logo on the wheel), but it's sincere. "Correct."

The car revs to life, and Miles pulls out of the parking spot.

"But, okay, I got it. No more clubs. What about bars?"

"Not a chance in hell, Butz."

"I'm kidding!"





Mayo and Mustard

By Elliot Sonder

“Hey mister, you can’t park here,” came an angry tap on the window of Larry’s orange 1995 Camry. The little acolytes had scattered when he pulled in, tires crunching across the gravel of the makeshift parking lot of Kurain village. Even Pearl had ducked inside the manor, not recognizing him frantically waving.

The window rolled down with a stutter, nearly getting stuck halfway as Larry twisted the lever. The window lowered to reveal Maya Fey, arms crossed and hip jutting out in annoyance. The scowl on her face was cutting, the kind of thing he expected from Edgey. Not Maya.

Something caught in Larry’s throat. Maya’s expression was ten entire degrees colder than anything Elise had ever sent his way, but he couldn’t help the lurch. They had the same eyes. He had forgotten how much they had the same eyes.

“Oh. Laurice,” Maya groaned.

“Yep, that’s me!” Larry grinned. “I heard it’s someone’s twenty-first birthday today!” he sing-songed.

“What’s it to you, Laurice?” Maya interrogated him with the same ruthlessness he’d seen Nicky and Edgey perform, shoulders set and finger pointing down at him.

“I thought I’d take you out to celebrate. Everyone needs an older friend to go with, right?”

At that Maya stiffened and craned her neck just slightly, focusing on some point behind Larry’s head. A double take revealed nothing—and, oh, she had been hoping the diffuse shadows of the passenger seat would unblur and reveal Nicky beside him, and his daughter in the back.

Larry caught her eye, the moment sticking between them. But like with a lot of things in his life, Larry folded first, dragging his gaze away from the emotions playing across Maya’s face within only a few moments. He heard her take a shaky breath, and the crunch of her feet on gravel. Perhaps this hadn’t been a good idea after all.

“Yeah, okay. Sounds cool, I guess,” Maya mumbled, grabbing at her sleeve. “Just let me go change.”

The ground was wet in the first dredges of spring, winter not yet having given up its hold, and Maya flounced away with a squelch. Every few feet or so she turned to look back at him, narrowing her eyes, as if worried he’d disappear if she didn’t double check. But before too long she was in the manor, slamming the door closed behind her, and Larry was left alone with nothing but his thoughts and his car.

He tapped on his steering wheel to the beat in his head, drumming along to Nickelback’s ‘Rockstar’. It wasn’t until he’d gotten through the song two and a half times that he felt a prickle of sweat on his neck. He needed something else to do with his hands.

Looking around his car, the *mess* that had previously faded into sight blindness seemed to suddenly blare to life. Most of it was art supplies that he actually had specific places for, but somehow they

always seemed to creep their way out of those places to the rest of his car when he wasn't looking.

By the time Larry had cleaned the front passenger seat to a level he deemed acceptable, Maya still wasn't back. His palms were beginning to sweat too. He looked at the manor as if staring it down it would give up its secrets to him, and summon Maya Fey through the watery spring air.

With nothing left to do, Larry twisted around to palm the delicately wrapped packages in the back, thumbing along the deep crease in one made when he used too much tape and tried to course correct with... more tape. He sucked in a breath at the oblong one, wrapped worse through shaking hands. He had an old hoodie in the back that he'd meant to give to his last girlfriend, he could cover it with that, leaving only the smaller, round gift visible.

The decision was made for him when the door screeched open and Maya flopped into the passenger seat.

Larry suddenly realized he had never seen Maya out of her acolyte robes. Casual for her apparently meant purple high tops, dark jeans, and an Ivy U pullover that she had to roll the sleeves up three times. It looked—but it couldn't be—but it might be—Larry was pretty sure the sweater was one of Nicky's old ones.

"Let's just go," Maya sighed out with resignation.



Shlorp! Maya held direct eye contact with Larry as she took the first sip of her fifth drink of the night. This one was a fizzy electric blue something or other—Larry had stopped paying attention to their names around the third one. With a soft swallow, Maya furrowed her brows and considered

the drink. Larry swore he saw her mouth twitch, almost about to smile and he let relief warm his gut.

It was a premature celebration, when Maya wrinkled her nose and declared "That one is disgusting too," drawing out the syllables of disgusting, and pushing the drink away from her towards Larry.

He swallowed it down in one shot, still not even close to tipsy.

"Buy me something else," Maya demanded, pointing randomly to a drink on the cocktails list, something named 'Honey Badger Blitz'.

Larry grinned, scratching at the back of his head. "Course, of course," he chuckled.

With a lazy swish of his hand he waved over the waitress again, exchanging flirty one liners with her until Maya glowered at him to get on with it. It was a long empty five minutes of silence until the nice woman came back with a green drink that she put in front of Maya with a chirpy laugh, trying to engage the young woman in friendly conversation. Maya sent her away with a glare.

This time Maya did not take a sip right away. She took the sweating glass in hand and stirred the ice with her straw, eyes unfocused towards the table between them. The drink sloshed a little as she stirred and Larry watched her hand tighten against the glass, the straw crumpled soft between her fingers.

Maya made sharp eye contact again. "Laurice, why are you even here?" she snapped out.

"To celebrate your twenty-first birthday, My." He had heard Nicky use the nickname on Maya before, saw the way it had always lit up her

smile. Maya was not smiling now. Larry had a sinking feeling that he had said the wrong thing, as usual.

Maya banged her little fist on the table, sending ripples through the 'Honey Badger Blitz' and the pint of light beer Larry had been nursing all night. "Do not call me that. Nick can call me that. And you're not Nick."

Maya's voice rose through the octaves, tremulous and heavy as she continued talking, "You're just some pathetic loser who my baby cousin practically had to parent during the worst crisis of both our lives. You barely even know me."

Maya reached across the booth to smash her finger into his chest at each syllable, asking sharply, "So why take me out for my birthday?"

"Any little sister of Nicky's is a little sister of mine!"

"I don't need another older brother, Laurice, my previous two are doing just fine!" Maya growled sarcastically. Fine being in jail, in the case of Godot, and disbarred, in the case of Phoenix.

Larry licked his lips and tried again. "I didn't want you to be alone on your birthday, Maya," he said quietly. "It really blows." Digging to his back pocket Larry fished out his wallet and carefully extracted a weathered photo.

He slid it across the table, avoiding the small wet patches of alcohol until it was in front of Maya. It seemed like she might ignore it at first, her anger so comfortable as to be inescapable, but she must have caught the earnest curve of Larry's mouth, or the soft tremble in his hand, because eventually she picked the photo up to examine it.

Larry had memorized it. Him, wearing two party hats, double fisting two beers, face down on a grimy bar table that should've been for two (or

three).

"Nicky and Edgey didn't come to my twenty-first either," Larry explained, quietly embarrassed at Maya's gentle scrutiny.

"What the fuck?" Maya swore, and Larry flinched at the foul language.

"Nick couldn't even be bothered to go to your party?"

It felt—Weird. For someone to be angry on his behalf. It was a rare shade he'd never tried on before.

Habitually, his tongue stammered out excuses. "Well, it's not a big deal, I mean, Edgey was, y'know, Edgey, and Nicky was so busy studying to save him. It's fine really. I mean. It's just my birthday party. Something probably would've gone wrong anyways. And Nicky always means well, he probably needed the night to himself, right?" Larry grew quieter and quieter as he talked, the excuses sounding hollow the longer they went on.

Maya watched him, biting her lip. As he petered off into silence, something in her seemed to break and Larry swore he saw the exact moment, and his own heart broke for her.

Maya scrunched up her face and sobbed. In mere moments she was red faced and bawling her eyes out, sniffing disgustingly and wiping her nose on the sleeves of Nicky's sweater.

"I'm, I'm, I'm," Maya struggled to get out the words, breath huffing with her tears. "Sorry," she wailed. She sniffed wetly and tried again. "I've been such an asshole to you Larry. You're being so nice."

She swallowed and choked out, "I miss him so much."

Larry willed himself to move. He was used to women crying about him, not at him, and he needed to get up and *move*. His feet were smarter than his head, and he was crossing to Maya's side of the booth, and asking if he could sit next to her and she was clinging to him, and his head was rushing high and fast.

Maya shook in his arms, let him pat her back, sobbed into his chest. Eventually, voice hoarse, she explained further, "I'm such a shitty sister. Nick is going through the worst time of his life and he won't let me help him. I haven't talked to him for months, and I thought maybe today, he might... Sometimes I get scared that he hates me now, and it's so stupid, and I'm supposed to be a good little sister, how can I even think he hates me? He has so much bigger things to worry about and I'm crying like a baby because he won't give me attention. I'm supposed to be better than this for him. And I don't have anyone else, Larry. I want Nick. I want my mom. I want Mia."

What did he even say to the girl sobbing again in his arms? How could he comfort her? But then suddenly he knew, with a visceral heartsick grief. On his own twenty-first birthday, he hadn't cried in the bar. He made it all the way home, before he sobbed his eyes out. It was the loneliest he had ever been. And it was how lonely Maya was now.

He thought about what he'd say to littler Larry then, what he'd say to Maya now. Maybe she wouldn't have to end the night sobbing into her pillow.

"You're not a bad sister Maya. Not at all. It's okay if you want Nicky's attention. Being lonely hurts so much. It really, really hurts. And you can only distract yourself for so long," he mused bitterly. "But maybe, neither of us has to be alone. I won't try and be your big brother, but I'd really like

to be your friend, if you'll let me?"

Maya wiggled and cried as he patted her back, but it felt like she was nodding along.

"And I'm going to kick Nicky's ass for you!" Larry wailed out, in his typical hysteria. "He has no excuse breaking a girl's heart like that!"

Maya, finally, finally laughed, and looked up at him, lashes wet with tears to say "Maybe just tell him to call me sometime, okay?"

"Okay," Larry agreed.

Maya pushed him away after that, and Larry wisely went back to his side of the booth, waiting for Maya to properly calm down and compose herself.

"So, friends?" he asked, sipping his beer as Maya finished wiping her eyes.

She nodded, looking guiltily at the barely touched drink in front of her and the empty glasses piled on the table.

"Larry, I don't think I really want to drink tonight. Sorry for wasting all your money." Maya fiddled with her straw, shamefaced.

"Don't worry about it," Larry laughed flippantly, "I get free drinks because an ex-girlfriend works here. I probably should've asked you what you wanted to do anyways."

Maya considered for a moment before suggesting, "Maybe bowling? Or an arcade?"

"Why not both?" Larry responded with a wink.



Kershunk!

The tinny speakers of the little tv above them rattled static as it warbled through the celebration of Maya scoring a turkey in bowling.

Whirling around from the perfect stance she had frozen in, to watch the ball whoosh down the center line perfectly, Maya flashed him a peace sign and a megawatt grin.

“And that’s three! Pay up Larry,” she demanded, practically skipping over to him.

Pulling out a five-dollar bill, he placed it into her open palm. His wallet was getting uncomfortably light at this point and he was starting to suspect that Maya was much better at bowling than she had initially claimed.

“You would think you’d be nicer to a guy who’s paying for everything, and let him win once in a while,” Larry joked.

“Nah, that’s how you know I really like you, is when I exploit your kindness and generosity,” Maya barked back with a wink.

“Mia used to hustle guys at bowling all the time, y’know?” Maya murmured.

“It was actually pretty annoying, sometimes,” she admitted, in a careful way that Larry was intimately familiar with. Elise wasn’t perfect either, but how did you talk about it when they were dead?

“Mostly it was because she’d pay more attention to them than to me. And we couldn’t just have fun bowling. She did teach me to throw a strike

at least.” The laugh that escaped Maya’s mouth was a little too fake for Larry, bitterness bit back into shape, a nice and gentle lie.

“Is this,” Larry paused and licked his lips, frightened of the answer, “fun?”

Maya snapped her gaze to him. And beamed, megawatt and brilliant. “Yeah, actually, you’re pretty fun to play against, Larry.”

Larry’s heart flipped. It was probably indigestion, even though they still hadn’t eaten. Yeah, indigestion or something. Thankfully, Larry didn’t have to think about what the ‘or something’ might be, because Maya’s stomach interrupted the meaningful silence.

Maya grinned, somehow, even harder, the edges of it gleaming with mischief. “Guess who gets to spend the rest of his money on food?”

A snort. “I bet he’s a really cool and fun friend type, right?” Larry fished.

“Right,” Maya replied with a wink.



In the end, it was Maya who got the food for them, when Larry remembered the presents for her tucked carefully in the back seat of his car, and had to go get them. He hesitated again at the oblong one, the package heavy with expectation. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea. But. Well. It was already wrapped.

The night felt fragile though. What if he fucked it up again with Maya? He wanted to be friends with her. She was one of Nicky’s Very Important People. (Even if he was doing a poor job of showing it

recently.) And Elise was her mother. Every life at Dusky Bridge had changed, and now they were all scattered away, full of pain and sadness and anger. Larry wasn't good at much, he thought, but he was good at dragging them all back together, he was the sad wet glue that refused to let them go.

The oblong package fit snug under his arm when he took it, the other present held tight in front of his chest. He would reach Maya, he would start with her, and bring everyone back together, slowly.

The plan completely fell apart when he saw her wave him down from a booth near the back of the bowling alley/arcade he'd taken her to, and he shoved the unruly oblong package behind his back, twisting his wrist uncomfortably to hold it there.

When he got to the booth he shuffled in, delicately balancing the present to keep it both safe and unseen by Maya. The veritable feast laid out before him came into sharp focus as he sunk into the deflated booth seats, maneuvering the package out of Maya's line of sight. If she noticed, she was polite enough to pretend otherwise.

"I told them it was my birthday and got a bunch of free food, Larry!" Maya cheered around a mouthful of burger.

He wasn't sure he could eat just yet, no matter how good it smelt. But he was glad Maya could. He'd known a lot of women who didn't want to eat much around him, worried about what he'd think of them. What he thought was that they deserved to eat and feel full. What usually tangled its way out of his mouth, jumbled without his consent by his damn brain, usually had the opposite effect. For that reason, he said nothing, and waited.

Maya let him wait, not pointing out the very clear round package

peeking up from his lap until she was licking the grease off her fingers.

"What's that?" she asked, with a coy little smile that said she knew already.

"Just a birthday present," Larry shrugged. "Picture book money came in, so... no more coupon books as gifts for this guy!" He thumbed towards himself awkwardly.

Maya pushed her food aside and wiggled her fingers, hands grabby for her gift.

It was easy to hand over, light as he passed it across the table. The package was a fat cylinder that fit easily in Maya's small hands. On that one the wrapping was nice, each fold and crease of the paper well wrought. A brief snowfall of wrapping paper later, and the present was sitting in front of Maya in all its glory: a cylinder that contained *Eau Du Law*, an incredibly pungent lotion with the tagline "Tough on dry skin, like we're tough on crime!"

"Uh, thanks Larry," Maya said, the slightest wobble in her cheerful voice, and a smile that was a little too wide.

Oh god, Larry recognized that smile and tone. It was the one women always gave him when they were pretending to like his gifts. He thought it was a great gift. Isn't that what young women were into? Lotion? Especially expensive lotion!

"What about that one?" Maya asked, pointing at the one thing he didn't want her to be pointing at.

"That one's not as cool," Larry admitted, crestfallen. He picked at the skin on his finger nails. "I made it."

He didn't add: *you know how me making stuff for Feys goes*. Even he knew better than to talk about his tentative new friend's dead sister at her birthday.

"You know, us ladies don't like it when you tell us how to feel about you, Larry. Why don't you give it to me anyways, and I'll tell you if it's actually cool or not, okay?" Maya suggested, gentle and warm.

Larry grumbled, but did as she requested, handing over the oblong package. That time was hard, it was heavy, so heavy, and the meaning behind the gift was not fun or easy.

This one Maya took her time with, running her fingers across the wrapping paper, feeling the place where he'd used too much tape, peeling the paper back, revealing inch by inch the gift he'd laboured over for hours.

It was watercolor. A portrait of Elise, holding her book, looking at the viewer with the kindest eyes Larry had ever known. The eyes had taken forever, a part of the painting that he laboured over for weeks. He couldn't remember their exact color, the way light would glint off them when she gave him a kind word, and pictures didn't hold the same spark, couldn't capture the electricity.

"It's, uh. It's your mom," Larry explained awkwardly. He cringed; of course she knew it was her mom!

Maya didn't say anything for a long time. She ran her finger with the lightest touch over her mother's face, as though she could really feel the warmth of her cheek and the crinkle of her smile. She hugged the painting carefully to her chest, tucking it under her chin and meeting Larry's eyes.

"She's beautiful," Maya murmured, eyes wet. "Thank you, Larry." The thanks was heavy, full of unspoken feelings and tangled emotions, the

kind that were too big to talk about under the neon lights of a bowling alley-arcade.

When Larry swallowed, it was a half choke down his throat, clogged with memories of Elise. The burger in his hand dripped without him noticing, as he watched Maya move the painting back again to take in the face of her mother, hands shaking with effort to avoid touching the delicate canvas again. A few tears snuck out of her eyes and she sniffled wetly. He dared not even breathe too hard. This was a moment to absolutely not fuck up.

Something must have drawn her gaze, because a few slow moments later Maya was looking at him, and then a smile was cracking lightning across her face, and she was laughing, pointing at him with one hand and holding the painting safe with the other.

"Y-You spilled mustard down your entire shirt!" Maya laughed full and loud.

Larry looked down at himself and laughed. He *had* spilled mustard all down his shirt. On the plus side, at least the stain wouldn't clash with the color of his jacket.

As his laughter died down his cheeks pinked a little, and a maybe Maya noticed the way he had to hold back a flinch, laughing with someone always made things better, helped him pretend they weren't laughing at him. But the Feys were perceptive and she saw right through his facade.

Putting the painting of her mother aside, Maya smiled tightly, and cocked her head to the side. "I think I spilled some mayo on my shirt too," she offered, pointing to a tiny stain near the collar of her shirt and laughing at herself.

She really was laughing with him.

“Thanks Mayo,” he grinned.

The fuck-up that had slipped out of his mouth didn't quite register at first, but when it did, his entire face blanched.

Maya snorted gross and loud, hiccupping with laughter, “You too Mustard!”

“Now hurry up and let's eat so I can beat you at more arcade games!” Maya added, eyes bright with challenge.



It was 2 AM and pitch black in the village when Larry pulled in again. In the quiet overwhelm of too many stars, Maya was trying to keep her eyes open – and failing comically, as each time her chin dipped, she startled herself awake again, only for the cycle to repeat again mere moments later.

“Mayo, wake up, your birthday's over.” Larry shook her shoulder gently.

“Thank yoooouuu Mustard,” Maya slurred, sleepily nudging his hand away. “Now go 'way, there's a pretty girl.”

Larry's hand hovered near her shoulder, and then he relaxed again, the movement melting away in the dark.

“Yeah, okay.” He leaned against the steering wheel and tried to count the stars.

Later, he'd wake Maya properly, try to hand her the painting before she crushed his ribs in a hug and asked if he'd come to her birthday again next

year. Later, he'd promise that he would and that next time he'd make sure Edgey and Nicky are there, no matter if he has to drag them. Later, Maya would laugh and say she'd help and trudge her way back to the manor with the painting in her arms, slow in the cool night air.

But that was later.

For the moment Larry leaned back, let the gentle hush of his breath slow even further and closed his eyes, let himself consider the day a win, let the soft contentment of the moment linger in the dark.



The Magician's Apprentice

By akol404

The Wright & Co. Law Offices plaque above the door is half obscured by a piece of paper with writing in blue marker, making the sign now read "Wright Talent Agency". The window shutters are closed and when Larry tries the handle, the door is firmly locked.

In the past, Larry would barge in on a whim to be greeted by Phoenix slogging through another unusual case. The Phoenix who opens the door now is unshaven with dark bags under his eyes and a grim smile.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice." He steps aside for Larry to walk in.

"Leave everything to me! I know you'd do the same if I was in a bind."

The previously tidy waiting area is now covered in magic paraphernalia. Decks of cards sit on the coffee table and silk scarves are overflowing from an upturned hat. Phoenix pushes a box impaled with swords closer to the wall by a small television.

"Don't mind the mess. We're still moving in."

'We,' he says, but only Phoenix's luggage is tucked in a corner. The place seems lived-in by his new ward.

"I need to go but I'll be at the Borscht Bowl Club if Trucy needs me. There's money on the fridge for pizza. Trucy is," Phoenix stops tidying. "She

was just here. Trucy?"

"I'm here!" A voice says.

Larry spins around to find a little girl dressed in a pink magician's costume, complete with a top hat and cape.

"Trucy, this is Uncle Larry. The friend I was telling you about."

She smiles and holds out her hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Trucy, CEO of the Wright Talent Agency!"

Larry shakes her hand. She has a firm grip for a kid.

Phoenix glances nervously at the clock. "I really need to get going. Edgeworth said he sent over some educational videos for kids. It's in a package somewhere. Trucy knows where it is." He hops to put on his shoes and shrugs on a grey hoodie. "If you go to the park, make sure to be back before dark and —"

"Relax, Nick! I'm great at watching things. I was a professional security guard once!" For some reason, Phoenix doesn't seem too reassured. "It's only a few hours. We'll watch Edgey's videos and have a great time together." He gives Phoenix a thumbs up. "Right, Trucy?"

She copies him and flashes a thumbs up at her adoptive father. "Right!"

Phoenix looks over his shoulder three times before he makes it down the stairs at the end of the hallway. It must be separation anxiety from being a new parent, but Uncle Larry is here to give him the peace of mind to take those first steps toward independence.

Larry closes the door and Trucy locks it before joining him in the makeshift living room.

"I was working on some sketches before I came. Do you want to draw together?" He clears off the coffee table and begins unpacking his bag. He pulls out his sketchbook and a drawing pad for Trucy, and places a tray of colored pencils between them.

"Okay." She sits down and reaches for the pink pencil first, the cotton candy shade matching her ensemble.

"So, how old are you, Trucy?" Larry warms up with some basic shapes, then begins sketching out some character ideas for his new book: a sprightly spirit medium and a daring detective.

"Eight."

Larry taps his pencil on his chin. "Do you like living here with Nick?"

"It's okay."

She puts the pink pencil back and looks around, her eyes landing on his hand. Larry lets her have the green pencil without comment. She's such a quiet kid and he searches for a story to fill the silence.

"I think I was about your age when I met Nick too. We went to school together after he moved to town. He was accused of stealing someone's lunch money." Larry grins. "We had a whole trial to find out if he did it or not."

Trucy's eyes widen as she looks up at him. "Did he do it?"

"Of course not! There's no way Nick would do something like that! I stood up for him when no one believed him too," brags Larry, his chest puffing out, conveniently forgetting that Edgeworth had spoken up first.

Trucy's eyes narrow. "Who stole the money then?"

The room grows hot as the pressure mounts with her unwavering stare that transports Larry back to the witness stand. The faceless gallery jeers a chorus of accusations.

"It was a long time ago. I think it was just misplaced." Larry wipes the sweat off his forehead. "That's a nice drawing," he comments. On her drawing pad, a pink figure stands in the center. It's holding hands with a taller humanoid shape that can only be Phoenix Wright with the large black spikes sticking out from its head.

"Who's that behind you?" Larry points to a rectangular person standing behind Trucy wearing a matching pink hat.

"That's Mr. Hat! He's not feeling well today." She takes the yellow pencil to draw a big sun in the corner of her paper. With her arm out of the way, Larry spies a person at the far side of her page.

"Who's this?" Larry points to the lone person in pink.

Trucy's mouth morphs into a wide showman's smile. "I'm hungry! Can we order pizza now?"

"Uh, sure." Her tone doesn't leave room for question and Larry pulls out his phone. "Wait! I brought us hot dogs!"

He searches through his bag, tossing things left and right to find his hot dogs, bacon, and buns, a little squished from the commute but still serviceable.

"What do you say? I used to be a gourmet hot dog chef, you know!"

"That's fine." Trucy flips over her drawing pad and leads the way to the storage room turned kitchen.

A teetering mini fridge is pushed up against the wall with the promised dinner funds stuck to it with a Blue Badger magnet. Beside it is a portable electric stove perched on a small folding table, the plastic surface melted in a few places. The window above the stove is wide open for ventilation and boasts a view of the grey offices across the street.

Trucy pulls out a frying pan from a filing cabinet. Larry doesn't ask if there's a toaster or oven around and counts himself lucky when Trucy comes back from Phoenix's office with some tongs.

"It'll be quick so why don't you put on that educational show Edgey sent you? We can watch it together while we eat."

Trucy disappears without another word as Larry wraps the dogs in bacon and turns up the heat.

Even the walls seem thinner now. From the other room, he can hear Trucy tearing open some packaging before the Steel Samurai theme begins to blare at top volume from the television. As much as he seems like a hard-ass, Edgeworth's childish side peeks through when Larry least expects it.

Yet the energetic tune isn't enough to drown out the methodical rip of paper, a secret whispered under the guise of security from closed doors.

Larry washes the pan in the only sink he can find, the bathroom sink, and brings out two plates of his finest cooking. Trucy is absently watching the screen, her mind elsewhere from the glum look on her face.

She's still chewing her first bite in the time it takes for the Steel Samurai to vanquish a low level boss and for Larry to finish his meal. As the ending credits play, her question bubbles out in a rush, too big for her to contain.

"Do you think daddy will come back?"

"Of course he will!" Larry says quickly, wishing he hadn't eaten so fast now that he has nothing to do with his hands. "I'm sure Nick and everyone else is pounding the pavement looking all over for him."

His hands are clammy and Larry grabs a pack of cards to shuffle, the activity helping him ground himself. Phoenix told him last night after he put Trucy to bed: Zak Gramarye was gone and may never resurface with the charges against him and the arrest warrant hanging over his head.

Trucy is silent and Larry keeps talking, trying to dispel the uncomfortable tension in the air. "I'm sure the police are looking into every lead. They just can't talk about it in case he finds out they're onto him, you know?"

He tries to forget that even if they do find her father, that wouldn't solve the true problem behind his disappearance and Phoenix's disbarment.

"Not that daddy," she says finally, her bright wet eyes trained on the screen. "My daddy now. Do you think he'll leave me here with you?"

Larry looks away and doesn't acknowledge that she's over-salting her hot dog with tears, and considers it. But the image of Phoenix Wright shirking his responsibility for even one moment makes him laugh. No, even if he wrangled Phoenix into a Hawaiian shirt and onto a plane with a prepaid island getaway package, there was no way that he would stop worrying, stop working on Trucy's case for a second.

"Nick would never do that! I've known him for forever now and he's never not helped a friend out when they were in a pinch." Larry passes Trucy a box of tissues that he finds under a doll-sized guillotine. "He's had my back countless times and he's going to do the same for you. I

promise.”

The trust between them will grow in time, nurtured by the little promises that Phoenix keeps for her. But Trucy looks reassured for now as she wipes away her tears and digs into her food once more.

Larry shuffles the cards in his hands again. “You like magic, right?”

Trucy brightens like a light bulb switched on. “I love magic!” She says with a mouth full of food.

Larry clears off the coffee table and spreads out the cards face up. “Pick your favorite.”

Trucy’s hand hovers over them, then she plucks out the ace of diamonds. “What’s your favorite card?” She asks.

“The jack of clubs.” Like the jack of all trades.

She sits back and tips her large hat out of her face to get a clear view. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Larry pretends to lose her card in the deck and moves it to the bottom while shuffling. Her card in place, he flips a small stack, then grabs more and repeats the motion, reversing the piles with cards sticking out every which way, intentionally making a mess.

With a quick motion, he turns over Trucy’s card and can’t help but smile because there was no way she could have seen through his practiced trick. He flips over one last section and straightens his cards.

“And now, Trucy, your card!”

Larry spreads out the cards onto the coffee table triumphantly. All of

the cards are faced down, except for Trucy’s ace of diamonds.

“That’s my card!” Trucy exclaims, clapping gleefully. A mischievous grin spreads across her face. “Would you like to see a surprise?” She asks sweetly.

Larry straightens the deck and holds it out for her. “Show me.”

But instead of taking the deck, she removes her hat with a grand flourish and reveals the card inside.

A jack of clubs.

“You— how did you?”

“A magician never reveals her secrets!” She plops her hat back on her head and places the card neatly on top of the deck that he’s still holding.

“Fine, but it’s your turn now! Show me your best trick.”

That wipes the smile off her face and her little shoulders sag. “I can’t. Mr. Hat...”

Gently, Larry says, “you said he wasn’t feeling well today?”

Trucy nods. “Without him, I can’t do my favorite trick.”

Maybe that’s the reason she’s staying with Phoenix now that her father is missing. Mr. Hat must be too ill to take care of her, or maybe too old to be looking after a young girl.

“Daddy tried to fix him up, but he’s no good with stuff like that,” confides Trucy.

The man must be so sick that he needs professional care. “Well, yeah. Nick’s not a doctor.” Larry gets a puzzled look from Trucy, then an idea seems to form in her mind.

“Maybe you can fix him!”

“Woah there!” Larry shakes his head. “I can’t cure him either!”

“He’s not sick. I just need you to stitch him up!” She jumps to her feet and grabs him by the elbow, steering him toward a room with a sign that says ‘Trucy’ in glitter block letters.

“Look, Trucy, I’ve been a lot of things, but I’m not a surgeon. If he needs stitches, maybe we should have Mr. Hat go to a hospital.”

Her room is tidy compared to the rest of the place. In the corner, a strange mannequin is propped up against the wall covered in pink fabric and a top hat just like Trucy’s.

Trucy gently lifts the wooden figure and the attached mechanical contraption, and places it on her desk, making sure to brush away the fabric so it’s not snagged underneath. With the utmost care, she holds up the fabric and shows him the rip in Mr. Hat’s cape.

It’s a large tear, but it’s right at the seam. Trucy slides open her desk drawer and pulls out a small sewing kit.

“Do you think you can fix him?” She pleads.

Larry takes the sewing kit from her. Just for today, he can be a little bit of a surgeon.

“I sure can.”

Larry takes out the tiny pair of scissors and snips away the long thread

hanging from the seam. He threads the needle with what’s left of the pink thread and knots the end. Holding the cape inside out, he begins sewing the gap shut, weaving the needle in and out of the slick fabric.

“You’re really good at this,” Trucy comments as she watches from over his shoulder. “Daddy tried a few times and it didn’t look like that at all.”

That explained the horrible fraying and uneven punctures along the edge.

“Anything artsy and I’m your man!” He licks his lips as he works. “Is there anything you like to do, Trucy?”

“I practice my magic! But daddy said I can’t do it when he’s not home after...” she gestures at Mr. Hat.

“You don’t have any other hobbies?” Larry ties off his last stitch with a knot and flips the cape inside out to inspect it.

“I tried cooking but daddy says he wants to be here for that too.”

The cape looks as good as new and Larry shows it to Trucy.

“You fixed him!” She touches the repaired cloth reverently. “Thank you! You’re the best, Uncle Larry!” She hugs him and squeezes as hard as an eight year old can.

Larry hugs her back. “If Mr. Hat needs any more stitches, just leave it to me.” But it’s still a little sad that she has nothing to do while Phoenix is gone. He thinks of his own bag of tricks, taking a quick inventory to see if there’s anything she might like. And there is something he can give her — the magic to create something for herself.

“Trucy! I have just the thing for you!”

It’s Larry’s turn to lead her back to the living room, sparing only a second to let Trucy put Mr. Hat in a more comfortable position. Searching through the discarded items spread out around his bag, he finds a ball of yarn and tracks the long tail to the needles inside his bag.

“What’s that?” Trucy stares at the cyan clump in Larry’s hands.

“This, Trucy, is a hat.”

“Are you sure? It’s so small. I don’t think it would even fit me.” She ducks her head to show him and they both laugh.

“It’s only halfway done,” he defends half-heartedly. “Here, I’ll show you. If you’re interested, you can keep working on this one.”

Larry knits a round, working slowly as he explains what he’s doing. “See? We keep going until it’s the right size.”

Trucy bounces on her toes, excitement radiating from her whole body. “I want to try!”

Larry shows her how to hold the needles and how to weave the trailing thread through her fingers. He guides her through the first stitch, grinning back at her when it makes it safely to the other needle.

“Think you can do the next one by yourself?”

She nods, her shoulders tensing as she directs her full concentration to the next stitch. When it joins the first, he asks, “can you do the rest of the round?”

Trucy only stops once to let him show her how to move the next set of stitches onto the needles from where they’re waiting in the wings on the

attached plastic loop. When she finds her rhythm, Larry turns back to his art and lets the clack of needles and the sounds of the Steel Samurai defending Neo Olde Tokyo lull him into focus. In his sketchbook, he begins sketching a new character — a magnificent magician in pink.

At the sound of a key sliding into the lock on the front door, Trucy shoves her knitting into Larry’s bag.

“I really meant it when I said you could keep it,” Larry whispers. “If you’d like, I can show you other things you can make when you’re done with the hat.”

She slides it back out, considering it for a moment, then shakes her head.

“I want it to be a surprise for daddy,” Trucy whispers back. “I don’t want him to find it before it’s done.”

Phoenix probably wouldn’t be able to find it in the jungle of their living space and even if he did, it would probably look like just another prop. But before Larry can give her a crash course on the best ways to hide things in her room, the door opens.

“Trucy? Larry? I’m home!”

Trucy puts her project back in Larry’s bag and runs out to tackle Phoenix in a hug.

“How was your night, Trucy?” Even though he must be dead tired, Phoenix picks her up and kisses her cheek, making her giggle as his stubble scratches her.

"It was fun. We watched a lot of Steel Samurai."

"Steel Samurai?" Phoenix takes one look at the television and begins muttering something like "of course he would" under his breath. "How was the pizza?"

"Uncle Larry made us hot dogs! Did you know he used to be a gourmet hot dog chef?"

A look akin to regret flits across Phoenix's face. "Gourmet, right."

"I was doing it professionally!" Larry protests as he packs up his things, careful to not let Trucy's project slip out.

"Thanks again for looking after her. I'll find a babysitter so we won't have to impose on you again."

Trucy tugs on Phoenix's arm. "But daddy! We had so much fun! Can't Uncle Larry come over again?"

"Sorry Trucy, I'm sure Larry's busy with his other responsibilities." Phoenix looks helplessly down at his daughter, a little surprised at her insistence.

"But we're working on something together! And he has to come over again to see my magic trick now that Mr. Hat's fixed!"

"Mr. Hat is fixed?"

"Stitched him right up. He's completely recovered now." For the first time that day, Phoenix looks impressed. "And it's no trouble for me to look after Trucy. We had a great time together and it's inspiring to be around other talented artists." He gives Trucy a knowing wink. "Besides, I got some work done while I was here too."

"If you're sure... it would help a lot."

"Yes!" Trucy cheers.

"Just give me a call when you need me," Larry says, giving Trucy a hug before heading to the door.

"I will, thanks again."

Phoenix closes the door behind him and Larry hears the heavy lock turn.

Through the door, he can still hear Trucy's energetic voice and Phoenix's attempt at keeping up with her.

"Do you think he would be my assistant for a magic show? I could use someone for my sword box trick."

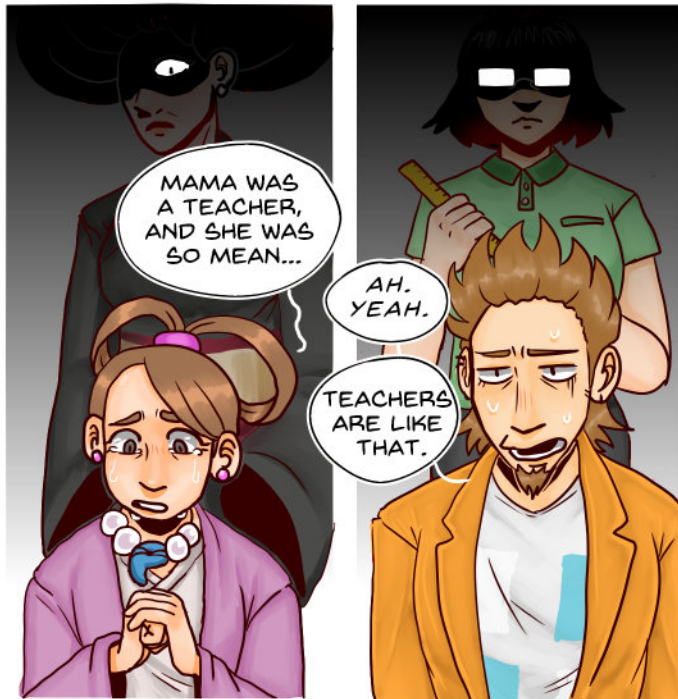
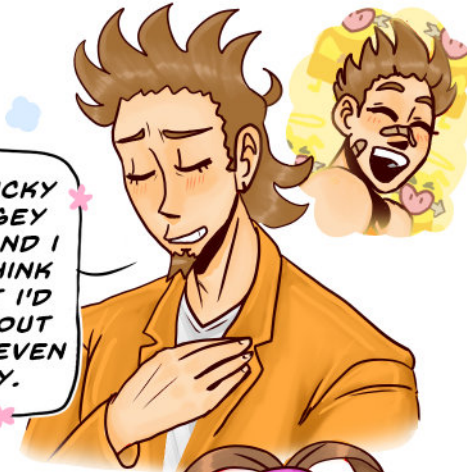
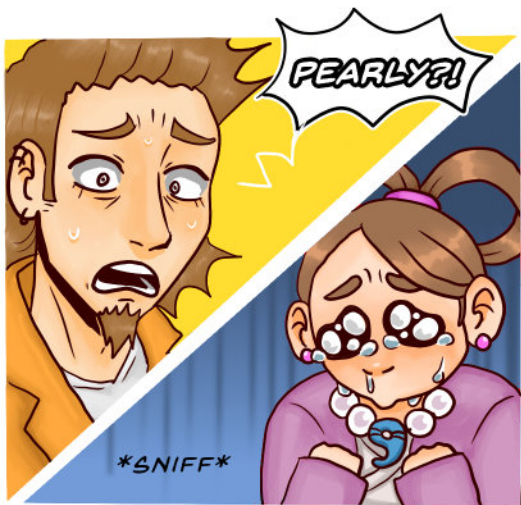
"I don't think we can afford an assistant for you yet. I think we should start small and then talk about assistants in a few years."

"But he's my uncle now right? My other daddy said that you don't have to pay family."

"That's called exploitation, Trucy."

"I'll put that down as a 'maybe.'"

Fancy that — Larry Butz as a magician's assistant. Larry stifles a laugh and walks down the hall to the stairs, wondering if Trucy would want to have matching outfits for their first show.





The Signing “De-butz” of Laurice Deauxnim

By TurnaboutMischief

It was eight o'clock sharp, one beautiful morning in the city of Los Angeles.

A battered pick-up rolls into the parking lot of a small comic book store. The truck's owner—an (overly) enthusiastic author by the name of Lawrence 'Larry' Butz, swerves into a spot. Powering down the truck in seconds, he snatches up his keys and leaps out in record time.

It was a monumental day in his career, after all, and he wouldn't settle for being even a minute late.

“Yahoooooooo!!!” he cries, slamming the door shut. “It's time for Laurice Deauxnim to meet his army of adoring fans!”

“Larry, would you perhaps lower your volume?” came an irritated voice from behind him. “You'll awaken the whole street.”

A red sports car had just pulled into the spot next to his. Miles Edgeworth glares at him menacingly from the driver's side, clenching a travel mug tightly in his hand. He tosses the keys over to his husband on the passenger's side. Phoenix catches them with ease and unlocks the trunk. He starts passing boxes of books and posters to their daughter Trucy.

“Aw, give him a break!” Phoenix says, way too chipper for it being so early. “This is a big day in his career, after all!”

Larry is *totally* moved that at least one of his two very best friends from childhood supported him in his writing endeavors. What a good man ol' Nick was—

“But you are still buying us dinner, right, Larry?”

“O-Of, course! I always keep my promises, man!”

Ouch. The dream...utterly crushed with a single question. Ah, well, he wouldn't let it get him down today! Not in the least!

After they gather everything together, the friends meet up with Otto Print, the owner of the store. He seemed to be a friendly guy, and the only one in the whole city who was willing to let Larry rent out a spot for cheap.

“It's a big honor to have an author wanting to do his book signings here!” Otto says as he puts out a folding table.

The newest Laurice Deauxnim book was a bestseller in *three* different cities—including LA. So Larry's agent had recommended that he do a book signing for his fans to say 'thank you'. Besides, it'd also be a good way to rack up the pre-orders for his upcoming release as well.

“Where's Maya and Pearls?” Larry asks as they unpack and set up the table.

“They had to take the train from Kurain. They should be here by lunch!” Trucy chirps.

The table is stocked with an array of fancy markers for fans to

choose from, and even some adorable merchandise that Larry made himself. Once everything was in its place, it was nine o'clock—time for the store to open.

Then the waiting game began.

Hours went by, and the only people to have shown up were the store's regulars. Larry wouldn't give up that easily, though. He keeps his eyes trained on the door, eagerly awaiting his scores of fans.

After another uneventful hour comes and goes, Trucy offers to do some simple magic tricks to draw in people. Larry gratefully accepts the help.

Lunchtime rolls around. After awkwardly finding his two lawyer friends making out in the corner of the store where the manga was kept, Larry mopes back over to the front to greet Maya and Pearl at his table. They'd even brought food with them for everyone—large burgers and fries.

“So, how's the signing going?” Maya asks between a mouthful of fries.

“Terrible!” Larry all but sobs into his burger. “No one's shown up, and I don't know why!” He flicks at a marker. “I do have fans, right? They'd show up...right?!”

“Of course they would!” Pearl says encouragingly. “They're probably just a little late, that's all!”

However, the day stretched on with no signs of fans *anywhere*. But while Larry was in the midst of a serious emotional crisis, his friends were only growing agitated.

Miles had been through all the Steel Samurai items in the store. *Twice*. (He did find a limited edition figure for his collection, though). Trucy became exhausted from her performance and had to go back to the car to

sleep. And Phoenix was sorting the markers *alphabetically* by color.

But Larry, being the kind of guy he is, decided it was time to investigate the problem.

“All right,” Larry says, bringing out his pipe, “No one's here yet, and we need to figure out why! Any ideas?”

No one raised their hands.

“Well, here's my theory: the city is being attacked by aliens!”

“Larry,” Miles deadpans, “People are still coming in. Therefore, aliens couldn't be attacking.” Before Larry could open his mouth to speak again, Miles adds: “The same goes for 'sea monsters'.”

“They also don't exist...” Phoenix grumbles under his breath.

“Argh! You two are so mean! There just has to be a reason no one is showing up, and I'm gonna find out why!”

Otto approaches them, keys in hand. “Hey, I'm going out for lunch. You can still do that little investigation of yours, but it'll have to be outside.”

So that was how the group found themselves in sweltering summer heat in a crummy parking lot—both annoyed and practically melting. Pearl and Larry looked into the alien possibility again, while everyone else watched over the abandoned signing table.

“... What if everyone in town had their memories wiped, and they don't know who I am?” Larry hypothesized, finally giving up on the aliens.

"Impossible," states Phoenix as he waves a magazine around for air. "We still know who you are. And before you say it--no, we weren't sent to another dimension, Larry."

"Oh *come on*, that's a very real possibility, I'll have you know!"

Miles simply throws his hands up in the air at his response and retreats to the car to also nap in the sweet air-conditioned bliss.

Whatever. The guy wasn't dressed for the weather, anyway.

Otto finally returns from his lunch a couple of hours later. Maya and Pearl snatch up boxes and make a beeline for the doors. Larry is about to follow them in, but he hears the hushed voices of Phoenix and Miles and stops to listen:

"You want me to go back there?!" Miles hisses. "Absolutely *not*! This was a *complete* waste of our day off together!"

"If you join us, I'll buy you that manga you were eyeing earlier."

"... *Fine*."

Larry is utterly heartbroken by his friends' words. On the verge of tears, he turns away, kicking an abandoned flyer on the ground as he does so. It flies up and smacks Phoenix directly in the face. Miles pries it off and studies it for a moment.

"Hold it, Larry!"

"Wh-What is it, Edgey?" Can't you see I'm sulking here...?"

"Yes, well, I ask that you take a look at this flyer for a moment. Specifically, the location printed on the bottom."

Larry leans over, squinting at the address. He reels back in complete shock.

"... That's got one too many zeros in it!" he cries.

"Yes," Miles answers, a sadistic smirk forming on his lips. "... And do you know what that means?"

He points dramatically at Larry.

"It means your fans are on the other side of the city, and have been this whole time!"

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

== ★ ★ ==

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, in a quaint little park, there was utter chaos ensuing.

It just so happened that there was a small chocolate sampling party taking place--and it had been crashed by hordes of very confused girls.

All holding Laurice Deauxnim books, they had been waiting hours for him to show up, but he never did.

... Who knows, maybe he was abducted by aliens?



CANVAS

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P.45





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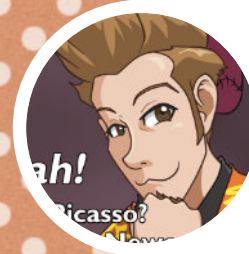
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Sir.Regrets

📷 @sir.regrets



Doodle Sweet

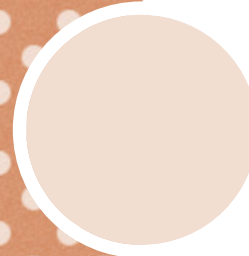
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Collab

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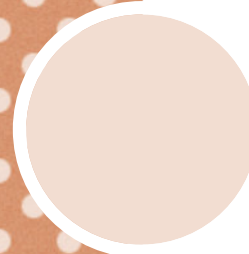
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t @PirateJenna



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When something smells...

In the Shadow of the Incident
is a free digital zine about
LARRY Butz, aka LAURICE DEAUXNIM
from Ace Attorney!

